



Our big fat gypsy eviction

Away from reality TV, life has never been tougher for London's traveller community. **Rebecca Taylor** reports from Dale Farm. Photography **Elisabeth Blanchet**

A toddler's yellow bicycle lies abandoned in the middle of a field, the wind whips plastic bags and food cartons against a line of rusting barbed wire and the lane is gouged with potholes the size of moon craters. Above the road, as if waiting for a Sergio Leone stand-off, a huge sign hangs from a tower of scaffolding: 'We Won't Go', it proclaims in large black letters. Behind the scaffolding is Dale Farm, a vast plot of land just outside Basildon in Essex, and one of the largest gypsy and traveller sites in the UK. Here, battle lines are being drawn for one of the biggest evictions in British history.

'I feel like crying all the time. An eviction will be horrendous, it will be violent,' says 70-year-old Mary Anne McCarthy, nervously fingering a string of rosary beads. Her 37-year-old son, Thomas, is seriously ill with angina in

Basildon Hospital. McCarthy says the condition has been brought on by the stress of the eviction threat.

Around the corner in a small caravan, Jean Sheridan, 26, is ushering her two-year-old triplets in for tea. 'Nobody here is sleeping, we are all getting sick because of it. I'm terrified that they will burn my children's home to the ground,' she says. 'We are upset and fed up,' says her brother, David.

Their home, Dale Farm, is at the centre of a long and bitter fight. Gypsies (of Roma descent) and travellers (of Irish extraction) first bought plots on this windblown site, formerly a scrapyard, in the 1960s. They set up caravans and mobile homes and electricity, water and gas connections. Over the years, the community mushroomed after councils began shutting down public sites. Now, 1,000 people live there.



'By remaining on Dale Farm, they are breaking the law of the land,' says John Buchanan, of the Billericay Residents Association. He says the reason parents withdrew their children from the school had nothing to do with prejudice. 'The traveller pupils come and go as they please. It has the highest rate of truancy in the country.' He says a local pub that was frequented by travellers is now boarded up and closed. 'Their behaviour when imbibed is not compatible with the local residents. There is simply a clash of cultures,' he says. In the picturesque villages and neat lanes that surround the site, other residents were not willing to talk about the encampment.

Basildon Council says it has no other options but to evict the travellers, despite legal and operational costs totalling up to £13 million. Tony Ball, the Conservative leader of Basildon Council, told *Time Out*: 'The green belt was put in place for a reason. How can we say to other travellers who want to

settle there that they can't, while we continue to let this group remain?'

The council legally have to give the residents 28 days' notice, after which the bailiffs can come at any time. 'We are in two minds about whether to give a definite date or not. We do have intelligence that anarchist groups will come down for a fight.' Will residents be removed forcibly? 'How they are removed is a matter for the bailiffs.'

Travellers and gypsies have been squeezed by legislation over the past few decades. The 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act prevented them from stopping on temporary sites, forcing travellers to find permanent legal accommodation on the few council sites, or on illegal land, such as Dale Farm. Under Labour, councils were given £150 million to spend on building new sites. But sluggishness in site provision, often resisted by local residents, has left around one-fifth of all gypsies and travellers with nowhere to live. Now, the government has scrapped those

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If they
come
for us
there
will be
trouble

targets and councils are no longer required to provide any sites.

Yet a partial solution might still be possible. Last summer, a government body, the Housing and Communities Agency, offered to rehouse the travellers on land it owns near Dale Farm. But people living close to the HCA land became nervous about the possible relocation after a meeting between the HCA and the council was leaked. Now the council will only agree to relocate a few of the travellers. 'Basildon will only consent to the HCA land if the majority of travellers are relocated outside the borough,' says Tony Ball. 'We are not going to house 400 people within Basildon borough – that goes against our commitment to mixed communities. It's not for Basildon to bear the brunt of this.' Grattan Puxon, from the Gypsy Council, who is fighting the Dale Farm case, says the families will probably be dispersed over several sites, possibly in other parts of the country.

Basildon Council's nimbyism is understandable to a certain extent – after all, Dale Farm comprises 40 per cent of all the travelling communities in Essex. But the gypsies' and travellers' predicament is largely not of their own making. They are caught in a tangle of legislation that has pushed and pulled them over the years, leaving them with very little protection. Although they remain a defined ethnic group, with their own culture and languages, two-thirds of Britain's travelling population now live in permanent housing.

That is not an acceptable option for the Dale Farm residents. 'This is the only home I have. They are not going to just turf us out on to the side of the road without a fight,' says McCarthy.

An uncertain future

Clockwise from top left: Mary Anne McCarthy with her granddaughter Maggie, 23, and her five-month-old great-granddaughter, Jasmine ('I've been prescribed tablets for the stress,' says Maggie); Naomi Connors, four, in her family's caravan; McCarthy outside her home; some Dale Farm residents live in chalets, which have better facilities for the elderly and disabled